

MIDDLE EAST MOVES AND COUNTER-MOVES

Russia, Britain, and the Arabs

JON KIMCHE

THERE are few things more deceptive than large-scale maps of the Middle East. On them the Middle East countries snuggle so closely under the overbearing Soviet shadow that Russia's favorable strategic position vis-à-vis the Middle East is generally taken for granted. This assessment of Russia's strategic situation can be seen at the root of one of the most outspoken fears that has been expressed since the United Nations Assembly voted for the partition of Palestine: that this will enable the Russians before long to use the Arab-Jewish conflict as a pretext to march troops into Palestine and gain the military foothold in the heart of the Middle East that they have so long sought.

Such apprehensions have been reported from a spokesman of the American General Staff; they have been expressed by Senator Brewster; and they have been expressed with particular bluntness by the representative of conservative Catholic opinion in Britain, the weekly *Tablet*, which describes the Assembly vote as a "disastrous decision" and adds the fear that the Russians will make the

most of the military foothold they have gained in this way. Similar anxiety about Russian intentions was expressed just two years ago, in the winter of 1945, when the Russians appeared to be extending their position in Azerbaijan in Northern Persia. Then, too, the world press and military opinion in the interested countries were alarmed by the prospect of Red troops advancing in the Middle East.

ODDLY enough, there was then, as there is now, one important breach in this alarmist front. The British Imperial General Staff, which has perhaps more actual experience of communications and warfare in the Middle East than any other similar body, did not in 1945 consider the Russian advance in Northern Persia as a serious military threat to the Middle East. Similarly, it does not now share the fears that internal conflict in Palestine will lead to the entry of Russian armies.

Actual experience of the distances and the terrain over which the Russians would have to march from Baku to Tel Aviv has convinced the British that this is plainly impracticable. The distance by road is about 2,500 miles—considerably greater than the distance by road from Moscow to London. The ground over which the Russians would have to come is alternately rugged and mountainous and then waterless desert, and would require a major military operation as well as considerable time to be carried out. Considered in this sober light, the British military advisers have concluded that for Russia the reward of having some troops in Palestine, and perhaps even a small military base, would not warrant the expenditure of military effort, accompanied by unforeseeable political complications, which such an

IN THE discussion of the Palestine problem, the conflict between Russian expansionism and British and American interests in the Middle East has been a moot subject. With a prevailing dearth of knowledge of that region, extreme statements and highly emotionalized speculation have tended to rule. JON KIMCHE's analysis, here presented, is only one man's view; but it comes from a political analyst of unusual insight who has been in the Middle East in recent weeks, and who has had access to first-hand material. Mr. Kimche, until recently managing editor of the *London Tribune*, is now touring North Africa and the Middle East. He wrote the article "British Labor's Turnabout on Zionism" in the December 1947 COMMENTARY. He was born in St. Gall, Switzerland, in 1909.

entry into Palestine would require. And while Turkey controls the straits no entry into Palestine can be made through a naval approach.

Indeed, the general view appears to be that such discussion of possible Russian military intervention merely diverts attention from the far more important political and diplomatic aspects of Russian intentions in the Middle East. For it has become clear that Russian diplomacy has a whole series of irons in the Middle East fire.

Since the end of the war, the motives of the Russian policies have been mixed and fluctuating, but they can be reduced to three main heads:

FOREMOST, clearly, was Russian disquiet about her open Middle East flank. Seen from the Kremlin, both Turkey and Persia were springboards lying dangerously close to Russia's industrial vitals: the Caucasian oil-fields and the mineral industries of South Russia. And seeing Russian policy at close range in Persia in 1945, in the Middle East in 1946, and in Turkey in 1947, has convinced me that the Russians were concerned to maintain the Middle East in such a condition that no hostile offensive against them could be mounted with the Middle East as the main base.

The second Russian iron in the fire was Middle East oil. When, at the Teheran conference in December 1943, President Roosevelt rejected a proposal made by Marshal Stalin that Middle East oil should be jointly administered by the Big Three, the Russians—it is clear now—decided on a political offensive in the Middle East designed to prevent all Middle East oil from coming under American control, and to provide also a share for the Russians. The mainsprings for this decision were partly economic and partly strategic. The Russian oil industry had been virtually ruined by the German occupation. Production in 1945 had dropped to twenty million tons—less than one tenth of the United States production, and no more than the output of the British oilfields in Southern Persia. It had also become clear

that the reconstruction of the Russian oil industry would be a slow business. By 1951—if the five-year plan is fulfilled—Russia will have from all sources thirty-five million tons, and the Soviet planning authorities estimate that by 1966 the Russian oil industry will produce no more than fifty million tons per year. Yet Russia's annual requirements, even today, are estimated at sixty million tons. It was almost natural that the Russians should cast covetous looks at the rich, undeveloped Middle East oil resources, which in 1951 will be producing over ninety million tons of oil, and by 1965 are estimated to be capable of producing more than double the then scheduled oil output in the Soviet Union. The Russian urge towards Middle East oil was therefore intense, and directly and indirectly this clearly remains one of the telling factors in Russia's Middle East policy.

The third decisive influence on Russia's Middle East policy was the traditional urge of Moscow which had slumbered since the revolution of 1917 and had now powerfully re-awakened: the search for a warm-water port and an outlet direct to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Stalin's wartime diplomacy had brought back to Russia all the imperial lands which had been lost after the First World War; it did not bring the accession of a port open all the year around and giving access directly to the strategic seas of the world.

IN PURSUING their aspirations in the Middle East, the Kremlin's diplomats made a series of considerable blunders and miscalculations. They overrated at first Britain's military strength in the Middle East, and misread her intentions there. As a consequence, all Russian effort immediately after the war was designed to weaken the British position in the Middle East and compel the withdrawal of British troops from this area by whatever means came to hand.

I well recall conversations in Teheran with a prominent Russian and a prominent American representative in the Middle East at a time when the Russian advance in

Northern Persia was proceeding apace; and it was evident that American policy in the autumn of 1945 supported the Russian suggestion that both British and Russian troops should be withdrawn from Persian territory. At that time, the Americans seemed to share the Russian illusion of British strength in the Middle East, and every step made by the American diplomatic representatives in Teheran and elsewhere was designed to encourage a British withdrawal.

Throughout 1946, the Russians pursued the opportunity which had thus been presented to them. They supported the insurgent Kurds and Azerbaijanis in Northern Persia; they encouraged the Kurds in Northern Iraq to resist control from Baghdad; they supported the Egyptian demand for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from Egypt and for the revision of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. At the same time, the Russians developed better relations in Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus with the governments there and generally conducted a lively propaganda for the Russian way of life throughout the fertile crescent of the Middle East. Right through the spring and summer of 1946 they maintained their propaganda and diplomatic pressure on the British, and traveling through these countries at that time one could see the advancing Russian influence on the political thinking of the Arab national movements. And as Russian influence advanced, that of Britain receded, while the American attitude at the time was one of aloof non-intervention and comparative unconcern.

This process had gone so far that in July 1946, Jamal el Husseini, the chairman of the Palestine Arab Higher Committee, told me in Jerusalem that when, a short time before, he had returned to Palestine after his wartime exile, he found the Arab movement in Palestine riddled with Communist influence. His first task had been, he added, to devote all his energy to break this Communist infiltration into the Palestine Arab movement. But even while Jamal el Husseini was assuring me that he had successfully eliminated Communism inside the

Arab movement in Palestine—and he was probably right—the Secretary General of the Arab Higher Committee, Dr. Khaledi, was telling the foreign press in Jerusalem that the Palestine Arabs would turn to Russia for help, and receive it, unless Britain declared Palestine an independent Arab state. Dr. Khaledi was not bluffing altogether. What he said reflected the climate of Arab opinion in the summer of 1946 and marked the peak of Russian influence in this first postwar phase.

BUT the Russians had miscalculated. They had overrated their own strength. They had written off the United States as a non-participating factor in the Middle East. They had relied too much on the illusory strength of certain pro-Russian movements, and as a consequence of this chain of errors Russian influence crashed from its peak to comparative unimportance in a matter of weeks.

The pro-Russian autonomous governments in Northern Persia were liquidated by the Teheran government; Pishevari, the Azerbaijani leader, fled to Russia; Mohamed Ghaza, the Kurdish leader, was publicly hanged with many of his collaborators; the Arab League states met in conference at King Farouk's palace at Inchass, and there agreed to strike jointly at Communist and pro-Russian organizations in their countries. Many hundreds were arrested in Egypt, many more in Iraq; in Syria and Transjordan the Communist parties were outlawed. Russian influence was sinking to its nadir.

The new factor which had surprised the Russians was the change of policy by the United States. Instead of non-intervention, President Truman proceeded to prop up the Persian government; he sent engineers, military advisors, and financial experts to reorganize Persia's affairs. American interest in all Middle Eastern countries was further underlined by the extension of United States oil interests in Saudi Arabia. An agreement was reached whereby the United States bought half the output of the British oilfields in Southern Persia. Furthermore,

a joint Anglo-American pipeline was to be constructed from the British-owned Persian oilfields through Arabia to the Mediterranean.

As the year 1946 wore on, the Russians clearly recognized their mistake. They withdrew directly and indirectly from Northern Persia; they made no further effort to re-establish their hold on the Persian government. They had sought to infiltrate into the Middle East via the comparatively obscure corner of Northern Persia, but they had been resisted and defeated and they now changed their tactics.

SOME Middle Eastern experts, particularly in Turkey, hold that in fact the Russian activities in Northern Persia were never really directed against Teheran or primarily designed to bring all Persia under Russian influence. They argue that the masked intention of the Russians was directed against Turkey, and that the Russian positions in Northern Persia were occupied in order to outflank the Eastern provinces of Turkey, and prepare for the next move. This was the demand for a revision of the Montreux Convention which regulates Turkish authority in the straits, and indeed, at that time a coordinated popular clamor was set up in Russia for the return of the Eastern provinces of Kars and Ardahan from Turkey to Russia. In fact, argue the Turks, throughout Russia's postwar Middle Eastern activities, one objective has been constant—Turkey. There was first the attempt on Turkey's flank in Azerbaijan; then there was the direct pressure on Turkey; and now, since the direct pressure has failed, there is another outflanking attempt, this time on Turkey's Western flank, via the new "government" of General Markos. This time, the demand is for the return of Eastern Thrace to Greece, and for the internationalizing of the straits and of Istanbul.

There appears to be a considerable measure of truth in this Turkish interpretation. Turkey is undoubtedly the cornerstone of the Middle East structure as created by the Allies after the First World War. If it were

to break or to be turned into a Russian satellite state, then the Middle East would be wide open to pro-Russian influence. This was recognized not only by the British and Americans, but also by most of the Arab states. Iraq and Transjordan, in particular, have assured Turkey of their fullest support, though the Turks have been cautious in their response.

A Turkish statesman explained this position to me last month. He said that, while Turkey seeks the friendliest relations with the Arab states because she does not want to see them used by the Russians as a kind of second front against Turkey, the Turkish authorities are under no illusion that militarily this is either meaningful or important; the only thing that matters for Turkey is the closest relations with one or the other of the two great powers.

Turkey has made her choice and has sided with the United States. She feels confident now that she cannot be broken by either direct Russian pressure or indirect political influence. Inside Turkey there is virtually no difference now between the violently anti-Russian policy of the Turkish governmental People's party and that of the opposition Democratic party. There is widespread agreement among the experts in the Middle East that at least for some time to come "Objective: Turkey" must be ruled out by the Russians as unattainable.

ALTHOUGH the pressure on Turkey has continued unabated in one form or another, and the Turks have been compelled to squander their income on keeping almost a million men under arms, the Russians have clearly directed their main interest elsewhere during the last six months. There has been a distinct reorientation of policy and a marked change of emphasis. The attempt to break Turkish resistance and to win the unqualified support of the Arab states had failed. Plans which had been matured in Moscow to call a great Moslem congress were abandoned, according to Arab leaders who had been in close touch with the Russians. The pilgrimages of Russian Moslems

to Mecca were no longer encouraged and ceased to receive the benefits of Moscow's full-blooded publicity.

With the realization in Moscow that the second phase of Russia's postwar Middle East policy had also failed, the men in the Kremlin evidently understood the mistake they had made. They no longer ranked Britain as their main enemy in the Middle East, and they no longer saw as Russia's primary objective the expulsion of all British troops from that area.

In March last year, when the four foreign ministers met in Moscow, Marshal Stalin had a private talk with Mr. Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, about affairs in the Middle East. Stalin, to Bevin's surprise, put his cards on the table face upwards. He told Bevin that the Soviet Union would no longer oppose the presence of British troops in the Middle East, in Palestine, Transjordan, Egypt, and Iraq, if the British would not call in American troops to assist them. In other words, the Russians would no longer object if the Middle East remained a specifically British zone of influence, but they would oppose and object if the Middle East became an area for combined Anglo-American activities. The British reply was cautious. Mr. Bevin gave strict instructions to the Foreign Office that everything was to be avoided in the Middle East which would give rise to Russian suspicion that there was a combined Anglo-American policy there.

Therefore, when shortly after Mr. Bevin's return from Moscow the United States government proposed to mediate in the unresolved treaty discussions between Britain and Egypt, the British government told the United States State Department before the offer was made public that it would prefer that the United States did not make the proposal. Mr. Bevin at that time was still concerned to maintain the Russian policy of virtual neutrality of which Marshal Stalin had spoken. The Russians kept their bargain. For some months after the March conversation they gave no support to the Egyptian claims on Britain, and also on the

Palestine question in the United Nations fact-finding committee, the Communist view remained markedly non-committal on issues where it differed from the British.

IT WAS a period of marking time for Russian diplomacy. It made no headway with the Arabs; it left the Jews in some doubt about its policy in Palestine; all that was clear was that Moscow was trying hard to prevent American influence extending through the whole Middle East. At the same time it seemed to be clear that it was playing a losing game, that American oil companies were extending their influence over the entire Arabian peninsula, and that whether the British liked it or not, they were in fact the partners of the United States in its Middle East policy. As the Russians saw it, British troops were the shield behind which American economic influence expanded swiftly throughout the Middle East.

The break came in the Middle East at the same time as in Europe. When Molotov walked out of the preparatory conference on the Marshall Plan in Paris in the summer of last year, the tacit Bevin-Stalin agreement of the previous March also came to an end. Russian policy in the Middle East had then played almost all its cards. The Russians had no friends left, few supporters, and virtually no contact in the Middle East.

At this point they turned to the support of the creation of a Jewish state and the partition of Palestine. It may be doing them an injustice to put the cause and effect so baldly. There is no doubt that humanitarian considerations and sympathies also played a part, but Russian policy has always been sufficiently realistic not to be swayed by sentiment. In the light of previous Russian tactics in the Middle East, support for the Jewish state was neither a deeply laid plot nor a far-seeing plan, but rather a last hope that this might be better than nothing, and that in this way something might yet be saved from the wreckage of Russian Middle Eastern policies.

But even while the Jewish state was be-

ing voted in the Assembly and the Russian and American delegates were shaking hands, Russian policy turned again to make one more effort to win Arab support. The whole Moscow propaganda machine was directed towards the Middle East. The new policy was outlined in an editorial in *Pravda* and a long article in the authoritative Moscow *New Times*. The *Pravda* article was entitled: "Who are the real and alleged friends of the Arab people?" It said:

"American imperialism, striving to place the Arab East under its own control, is playing a double game. On the one hand it is supporting the weakened British partner, using the British army and the British colonial intelligence apparatus as a police force against Arab liberation movements. On the other hand, the United States is intensively promoting her economic expansion, seizing one British position after another.

"The reactionary Arab feudalists, on the strength of their foreign support . . . spare no efforts in their attempts to divert the Arabs from the struggle against their real oppressors—the Anglo-American imperialists. They obediently repeat after their masters that the peoples of the Arab countries are menaced only by one danger, namely the Soviet Union."

The article then warned Arabs not to be misled by their false friends into making Palestine the main issue, but to concentrate on the real struggle of getting rid altogether of British and American influence in the Middle East. If they did this they would enjoy the whole-hearted support of the Soviet Union in this endeavor.

In light of these signs, it has to be expected that as the first phase of this Soviet offensive to regain Arab friendship, a full-scale political offensive will be directed against the remaining British positions in the Middle East: the British troops in Transjordan and in the Canal zone of Egypt, and a little later perhaps, the British oil concessions in southern Persia. The British authorities became convinced towards the end of 1947 that against such Soviet pressure backing the rising tide of Arab nationalism, it would

be impossible for any length of time to maintain these garrisons in the Arab countries. As a result, a marked re-orientation in outlook took place at the Foreign Office—though it would be over-stating the change to speak already of a new policy or detailed new plan.

THESE new ideas began to take shape during the United Nations discussions on Palestine and the fruitless private talks between the British Ambassador in Cairo and the Egyptian government, and they crystallized in a new pattern of British policy in January of this year. Once again, the British took the initiative in an activist Middle East policy—but with one important difference from previous British policy. The British government had this time talked over its ideas with the American State Department, and had received not only its tacit consent, but actual and firm assurance of United States support for Britain's new policy. And this policy was now also closely interlocked with Russian intentions in the Middle East; for the moment, at least, the Russians were thrown on the diplomatic defensive.

The new British plan was not a clearly and carefully thought-out long-term project, but emerged rather from a series of *ad hoc* decisions which, more by accident than design, assisted by no little diplomatic shrewdness, merged into the new pattern.

It started with the new treaty negotiation with Iraq. For eighteen months the Iraq government had pressed for treaty revision which legally was not due for another two years. After the United Nations discussions on the partition of Palestine, the time was considered suitable, in view of Britain's neutral stand, to proceed with the negotiation of a new treaty. It was decided in London to make this new treaty an example to all Arab states of what Britain can still do for her friends and allies.

The Iraq government was assured of military support in a manner never before given to any other government in a British treaty of alliance. The armed forces of Iraq were to receive military and air force training and

equipment in arms, planes, and ships of the most modern type "on the same priority as the armed forces of Great Britain." The actual signature of the treaty in Portsmouth was conducted with pomp and circumstance not equalled since the signing of the Entente Cordiale of 1906.

The treaty was designed to serve a double purpose. It was to re-establish close relations between Iraq and Britain, and it was designed to place Iraq at the head of the Arab League states, and so weaken the position of Egypt which hitherto has played the dominant role in the Arab League. While the Iraq treaty delegation was in London, Sir Ronald Campbell, the British Ambassador in Cairo, had come to London to report on his private talks with the Egyptian government. These reports convinced the Foreign Secretary that any hope of a new treaty of friendship and alliance with Egypt had to be buried. It was felt that with Egypt in her present anti-British mood, the position of the Arab League as an ally might also be jeopardized. It was from this point that the plan developed to make the Iraq treaty something of a prototype for other Arab and Moslem countries, and to begin the erection of a diplomatic structure which could in time supersede the Arab League, and which would be in friendly alliance with Britain.

A NUMBER of dramatic reversals of policy followed in pursuit of this idea. In the first place, the American State Department was taken into confidence, and at the same time that Mr. Marshall was informed of Mr. Bevin's intentions with regard to a Western union in Europe, he was also informed of these new ideas about a Middle Eastern alliance. The Foreign Office in London was extremely pleased with the reception that this latter project received in Washington and proceeded confidently with the new scheme—though it must be emphasized all the time that there was no overall blueprint, but rather a series of decisions arising from the current situation.

Probably the most important British decision in this connection was the abandon-

ment of hope of a settlement with Egypt, and the resulting conclusion that the Russians from now on would fully support Egypt against Britain, and use Egyptian nationalism to break the pro-British front in the Arab League and inside the Arab countries. A second conclusion along similar lines was that the new Jewish state might also become a fruitful base for Soviet activities, not because the Jews desired this, but because the British policy of neutrality and the American policy of hesitation would tend to throw the Jews into Russian arms, much as the Spanish Republican government was forced to look to Russia for help when France and Britain declared their non-intervention in 1936.

THE new series of treaties with Arab states is therefore mainly designed to counter this increase of Russian influence via Egypt and the Jewish state, and to isolate diplomatically, as it were, Egypt and Jewish Palestine in such a way as to minimize their future influence in the Middle East. No difficulty about this is anticipated where the Jewish state is concerned, but the Egyptian problem is more delicate. In fact, the British government has come up against a whole series of contradictions in its policy and the outlook for the new chain of alliances is becoming less sanguine. The Iraq treaty discussions in London were followed immediately by talks with a treaty delegation from Britain's staunchest ally in the Middle East, Transjordan. However, the emissaries of King Abdullah received a grave shock when they met Mr. Bevin. He told them that Britain had changed its policy about King Abdullah's plan for a Greater Syria. For many years the British had actually supported Abdullah's aspiration. Then, last year, they conducted a minor retreat from their previous position, and declared themselves "disinterested" and stated that this was a matter for the people concerned to decide, though privately Abdullah continued to receive no mean support for his plan from the British. Now Bevin told the Transjordan delegates that Britain was positively and definitely

opposed not only to the idea of a Greater Syria, but also to the smaller plan of a Greater Transjordan, which would incorporate the Arab sector of Palestine.

The purpose of this rebuff to Abdullah was to pave the way for the extension of the alliance to Syria, which hitherto had remained firmly outside the British zone of influence. The Syrian government has recently been greatly disturbed by King Abdullah's increased activity and propaganda, and Britain expects that it will jump at the prospect of what is a virtual British guarantee of the independence of the Syrian state as it exists at present. This definite turn against the aspirations of King Abdullah may also encourage King Ibn Saud to join the select circle of the new British alliance; that at least is the hope of the Foreign Office.

BUT even so, the British are still worried. They see no strong and popular leadership of Western calibre in any of these Arab countries, which could, if it came to the test, stand up to the combined pressures of Russian imperialism and Egyptian nationalism. Once again, therefore, some of the more farsighted and leading officials at the Foreign Office are casting further afield. They would like to bring Pakistan, with its eighty million Moslems, and its able British-trained statesmen and administrators, into the new alliance as the leading element. Pakistan, in fact, would become the cornerstone of the new alliance which might stand up against the dangers which the British foresee for themselves in the Middle East.

Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan might also be included, but these countries are con-

sidered far less important in view of the role now allotted to Pakistan as the new leader of the Moslems in the Middle East. That is the plan. Already, in its first unfolding, it has encountered serious difficulties with Iraq, but the British are convinced that, with America backing them up, the unholy alliance of right-wing pro-Nazis and Communists that overthrew the Iraq government which had signed the treaty with Britain cannot last, and that before long the Iraqis will return to the British fold.

For the moment, therefore, the Russians are on the defensive, trying to prevent the new British pattern from taking shape, because behind it they see a design encouraged by the United States. In this situation, it appears that things will happen much as the Foreign Office fears: the Russians will now encourage the Egyptian demands against Britain; they will naturally encourage both the Iraq Left and Right to hold out against ratification of the treaty; and if Syria joins in with the new plan of alliances, the Russians may add fuel to the anti-government forces in Syria among the many minorities there.

Finally, there remains the Jewish state. The British Foreign Office thinks that while there is no danger that it may become a base for Russian military operations in the Middle East, it may nonetheless become a loophole through which Russian agitation may seep into the Middle East.

And it must be said that the present policy of Britain and the United States in Palestine appears almost designed to force the Palestine Jews—however unwilling they may be—into the arms of the Russians.